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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 19th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KHOUINI (Tunisia)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 76: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/47/21, A/47/462, A/SPC/47/3)

1. Mr. MURTAZA (Pakistan), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77, said that the present world information order was deficient in many respects. Since developed countries enjoyed a virtual monopoly over the gathering and dissemination of information due to their technological advantages, particularly in the field of satellite communication, the third world found itself at a loss to arrange for a better balanced flow of information. The developing countries needed help in strengthening their communication capacities through the transfer of technology, sharing of professional expertise and all other measures possible to promote a two-way flow of information.

2. Pakistan fully supported freedom of information and expression. The press in Pakistan was free from any restraint and was playing a prominent part in national and international affairs in support of the institution of democracy. The Government of Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif had taken action to integrate Pakistan into global information systems.

3. His delegation noted with satisfaction the activities carried out by the Department of Public Information (DPI) in connection with international peace and security, African economic recovery and development, combating the policies and practices of apartheid, the situation in the Middle East and the question of Palestine, peace-keeping operations and cooperation with news agencies and broadcasting organizations of the non-aligned and other countries.

4. His delegation was surprised at the disclosure in the report of the Secretary-General that Development Forum would not be published after 1992, and urged DPI to take immediate measures for the continuation of that important publication, at least until the problems it faced were addressed by the Committee on Information at its next substantive session.

5. With regard to the issue of the United Nations information centres around the world, he stressed the importance of giving priority to the resolutions and mandates of Member States. Administrative decisions in the Secretariat should obviously not take precedence over the General Assembly mandate. His delegation also wished to caution against a selective implementation of the General Assembly mandate. The enthusiastic cooperation of DPI with UNESCO should not be confined to a limited area, and must focus on other useful aspects, such as the strengthening of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).

6. Expressing his appreciation for the statement made by the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information, he said that DPI had a

(Mr. Murtaza, Pakistan)

significant role to play in the revitalized United Nations. His delegation also supported the activities of the United Nations Correspondents Association, and called upon DPI to provide greater facilities to journalists for their professional activities.

7. His delegation would like also to see the strengthening of the Information Products Division, and commended the efforts of the Asia and Pacific Radio Unit. Pakistan wished to emphasize the further strengthening of its Urdu language broadcasts.

8. His delegation was concerned that Pakistan and other developing countries were not adequately represented on the staff of DPI, and urged that the situation be rectified in all recruitments, especially at the senior level.

9. His delegation welcomed the Republic of Korea and Senegal as the new members of the Committee on Information.

10. Mr. PRASAI (Nepal) said that the media of the North had globalized the development model of the industrialized countries; consequently, the traditional values and cultures of the developing countries were coming under increasing pressure. Nepal was firmly committed to the principle of free flow of information and ideas. The present situation was rooted in the lack of access to advanced technology and know-how; that same discrepancy was also at the root of the disparity between the more developed and the less developed among the developing countries. There must be an adequate transfer of technology and know-how on terms compatible with the economic condition of the recipient countries, as well as cooperation among developed and developing countries and among developing countries. The International Programme for the Development of Communication of UNESCO was promising in that regard. His delegation supported the central role of UNESCO in the development of information and communication.

11. Nepal accorded a high priority to the development of information and communication, and sought to use modern technologies of information and communication as part of its strategy to combat problems of underdevelopment.

12. Turning to the role of the United Nations Department of Public Information, he said that his delegation understood the budgetary constraints of the Department. An essential basis of its success would be its ability to strengthen cooperation with the media, non-governmental organizations and other agencies involved in information networks world wide. The Department had done admirable work in covering United Nations activities in the political and security fields and, especially, in connection with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

13. With regard to the United Nations information centres, he said that his delegation had no problem with the efforts of the Secretary-General to ensure an efficient and cost-effective United Nations presence in the field, but

(Mr. Prasai, Nepal)

wished to underline the need to keep in mind the interests of the developing countries. His delegation also wished to underline the importance it attached to the DPI training programme for media personnel, especially from the least developed countries.

14. Mr. ZVONKO (Belarus) said that the positive changes on the global political scene and the lifting of the iron curtain had opened up broad opportunities for inter-State cooperation in the exchange of information. For its part, Belarus had adopted new legislation guaranteeing the freedom of information, which rendered unthinkable a repetition of the post-Chernobyl situation in 1986, when the authorities had concealed the truth about the disaster from the people whose lives and health had been endangered.

15. Belarus believed that DPI was carrying out highly valuable work, in particular by disseminating information on the maintenance of international peace and security and by publicizing the Secretary-General's report "An Agenda for Peace".

16. The Organization's information structures were currently faced with the task not only of disseminating, but also of gathering information, particularly for the purposes of preventive diplomacy. Belarus believed that the United Nations information centres should be strengthened and mandated to assist in that task, thereby obviating the need to establish special mechanisms. The information centres would not take the place of fact-finding missions, but could serve as early-warning centres in the prevention of crises.

17. While DPI was performing valuable work in the environmental field, it was regrettable that the Secretary-General's report (A/47/462) contained no mention of the Chernobyl issue. The dissemination of information on the consequences of the Chernobyl accident was essential in order to alert the world's population to such dangers and the need to prevent similar disasters. The United Nations information services should take due account of those considerations, and Belarus was ready to make available all the information at its disposal on the Chernobyl problem. Work in that area by DPI would be significantly facilitated by the establishment in Minsk of a United Nations interim office, which, as Minsk was a coordinating centre of the Commonwealth of Independent States, would also assist the Organization in gathering information in that region.

18. As a member of the Committee on Information, Belarus hoped that the draft resolutions contained in the Committee's report would be adopted by consensus.

19. Mr. EVANS (United Kingdom), speaking on behalf of the European Community and its member States, said that they would like to pay tribute to those journalists who had died in the past year in the performance of their duty.

20. One of the most important functions of DPI was to disseminate information on United Nations activities, especially peace-keeping operations. Wide press

(Mr. Evans, United Kingdom)

coverage was the best way to enhance public awareness of, and support for, the increasing role of the United Nations in the maintenance of international peace and security. The European Community and its member States were pleased to note that there had been a number of welcome developments in that regard over the past year, including the Department's coverage of the situation in Cambodia and the chronology of events in the former Yugoslavia. They hoped that similar attention could be paid, within available resources, to other important operations, for example that under way in Somalia.

21. The European Community and its member States also wished to pay particular tribute to DPI for its work on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. They took the opportunity, however, to reiterate their view that information components should form, when necessary, an integral part of the plans for United Nations conferences and peace-keeping operations when the budget implications were submitted to the General Assembly for approval, and should not, in principle, be subject to ad hoc arrangements at a later stage.

22. On the issue of the United Nations information centres, the European Community and its member States had long believed that a coherent strategy was required, and had welcomed the initial steps taken to ensure that appropriate centres were integrated with UNDP offices without losing their functional autonomy. They also welcomed the establishment of interim offices in six members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. They noted with appreciation the measures taken by DPI to implement paragraphs 1 (l) and 1 (m) of General Assembly resolution 46/73 B.

23. Another area of major interest to the European Community and its member States was the working conditions of journalists at the United Nations. The United Nations would have to react imaginatively to meet those requirements in the light of the current financial restrictions.

24. In conclusion, the European Community and its member States paid tribute to the efforts of all the staff of DPI over the past year, and acknowledged with gratitude the commitment and professionalism exhibited by the former Spokesman for the Secretary-General and Director of the Executive Media Service and by the former Deputy Spokesperson. They extended a warm welcome to their successors.

25. Mr. ROSTING (Denmark), speaking on behalf of the five Nordic countries, said that it was vital to maintain the current consensus on the issue of information and the mandate for the public information policies and activities of the United Nations. Recent global developments had increased the demand for information about current events, while the opening up of new regions to the free flow of information and the development of improved technical means of dissemination had vastly increased the global audience, contributing to a closer relationship between nations and placing pressure on Governments and the United Nations to resolve the conflicts thereby revealed.

(Mr. Rosting, Denmark)

26. Freedom of information, guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was indispensable for democratic societies. The Nordic countries therefore deplored all the more resolutely the continued violations of that fundamental right and paid tribute to those journalists who had suffered or died in the performance of their duty. They also stressed the importance for a free press to be developed independently of Government influences, in the context of broader efforts to consolidate democratic processes and, in that connection, welcomed the declaration issued at the October 1992 United Nations-UNESCO seminar in Alma Ata. The Nordic countries also reaffirmed their support for the International Programme for the Development of Communication and their commitment to the development of information and communication infrastructures in the developing countries.

27. The recent far-reaching political changes in the world would significantly increase the responsibilities of DPI in coming years, and the Nordic countries therefore welcomed its efforts to rationalize and streamline its work. DPI should respond to new situations as they occurred and play a role in such critical areas as peace-keeping, election monitoring and the follow-up to the Conference on Environment and Development.

28. He supported the integration of certain United Nations information centres with UNDP field offices, since a unified United Nations presence would promote efficient use of scarce resources, particularly in the area of information dissemination. In addition, the Nordic countries strongly supported efforts to disseminate information on the important areas highlighted in the Secretary-General's report (A/47/462), such as peace-keeping, human rights, economic and social development, disarmament, the role of women in society and environment and development-related activities, all of which stood high on their own United Nations agenda, and hoped that the draft resolutions and draft decision contained in the Committee's report would be adopted by consensus.

29. Mr. RAFIRASME (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that information was a fundamental element of international relations and that its collection, publication and dissemination were key elements in any economy. Accordingly, the free flow of information was essential not only to solving the problems of peace-keeping and development but, more important, to building confidence between nations. And yet the gap separating the industrialized countries from the rest of the world prevented the majority of nations from making known their own values. The world was perceived according to the opinions of those in power, a situation incompatible with true freedom of information. The imbalance of power prevented more than 80 per cent of the world population from taking part in the global communications system; that situation had arisen because of concentration of communications technology, the predominance of economic interests, the wish to impose a particular cultural order and, certainly, of inadequate regional and interregional cooperation among developing countries.

(Mr. Rafirasme, Islamic Republic of Iran)

30. His delegation wished to renew its appeal for the establishment of a new world information and communication order not founded on opposition to the free flow of information or to the freedom of the press, but rather on the fact that the current situation was incompatible with those principles. International institutions, and DPI in particular, should help developing countries overcome the inherent imbalances of the current system.

31. With the strengthening of the role of the United Nations system, there was a need for greater support for DPI activities to facilitate its principal task of promoting United Nations objectives. Information centres were the principal means of reaching the general public in Member States, but they were so underfunded that very often they were unable to carry out their mandates. The inequitable distribution of budgetary resources among centres, the lack of clear logic in their establishment and the still ambiguous issue of their integration with UNDP field offices merited special attention during the following session of the Committee on Information.

32. With regard to the Tehran centre, his delegation was continuing to discuss with responsible officials of the Department the implementation of General Assembly resolutions concerning its reactivation. He joined with the other members of the Group of 77 in seeking full and prompt implementation of all of the mandates formulated by the Committee on Information, particularly those concerning the information centres. He drew members' attention to the fact that IRNA, the Iranian press agency, was about to conclude an agreement with DPI for the distribution of United Nations information materials to the news agencies of members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

33. In restructuring the Department, careful attention must be paid to achieving an equitable geographical distribution of staff in the Professional and higher categories, since the Department should reflect the diversity of the United Nations. Naturally, that process should likewise guarantee the highest level of integrity and efficiency.

34. Mr. REYES MATTA (Chile) said that the Committee's deliberations had emphasized two priority goals: to continue and strengthen professional training and to continue programmes to publicize United Nations activities. To do so, the United Nations should concentrate its communications effort on two areas of dynamic growth, making use, first, of the mass media's global scope and immediacy and, secondly, of the global, regional and national interaction of non-commercial information systems and of non-governmental organizations' information networks.

35. In both cases, the United Nations could make use of its major competitive advantage, its ability to grasp local and global reality at the same time. Through its projects, its peace-keeping operations, the multinational origin of its experts, and its agencies' presence in the field, the United Nations

(Mr. Reyes Matta, Chile)

was in a unique position to know, understand and explain what was happening in specific parts of the world, while through the work of its principal organs - the General Assembly, the Councils and the Secretariat - and its agencies, it was also able to provide the world with an overview of the current situation and its future prospects. The United Nations should press that advantage and take action on information.

36. In communications, 1992 had been a year of significant progress for the United Nations: the members of the Security Council had held their first summit meeting of heads of State; the Secretary-General had put forward his "Agenda for Peace"; the Conference on Environment and Development had been held in Rio de Janeiro. In each case, one or more of the necessary factors for successful communication had been present: principals of recognized prestige, a novel and stimulating message, and a dynamic interaction with the audience involved.

37. The universality of modern communication did not lie in the millions of receivers scattered over the globe, nor in the satellites broadcasting to them, but arose when people all over the world took up a common theme and began to think about it. When people were interested in a subject, the media were more than willing to broadcast it. Accordingly, United Nations information systems should seek to become cultural facilitators, mediating the interaction among various messages and innovative visions.

38. The great information revolution of modern times was based on "communities of interest" able to get their messages across despite borders and language barriers, thanks in part to alternative information networks on video and audio cassette. The contemporary audio-visual world had room for both the professionalism of the official media and for the creativity and curiosity of social groups and individuals recounting their experience.

39. In the field of information, the United Nations must seek immediacy as well as precision and depth. Lately, the newsman's six classic questions were being replaced by three modules of equal importance: the facts, the story and the context. Traditionally, in developing countries in particular, the story had been the predominant factor. Nowadays, however, there was a trend towards presenting the facts in their own right, thereby enhancing the communicative gestalt, while the context, in an age of information overload, was becoming more and more essential to understanding the situation.

40. One of the priorities in the work of DPI should be to identify shared perceptions. As a world forum, the United Nations would increasingly be the stage on which ideas and courses of action were formulated. It was not enough simply to relate in sequence what each speaker had said: there was a need to define what they had in common. Another priority should be to identify emerging issues and provide imaginative guidance on them, while a third should be to promote simultaneous world-wide action. To that end, people all over the world should be brought together to discuss their concerns and discover

(Mr. Reyes Matta, Chile)

what they had in common. The technological resources existed, and with an imaginative proposal, the requisite funds could be raised. What was lacking was the will to bring professional skills to bear on promoting new kinds of dialogue in the world as a means of providing guidance to rulers.

41. In the twenty-first century, the processes of communication would give rise to an interactive culture, with increased cross-border dialogue among people and countries. Such a culture was already being formed, as a global awareness and sense of belonging was directly related to people's roots in a local culture that strengthened their identity. The time had come to set in motion an information agenda for peace based on the experience of the first 50 years of the United Nations and on new strategies for peace and security in the coming decades.

42. Mr. WORONIECKI (Poland) said that the future information gathering activities of DPI should be highly selective and carefully tailored to changing priorities in the information market. Poland fully supported the need for first-hand access to information on the newly independent States, which could be provided through such measures as the creation of information components within integrated offices, and it shared the hope of the European Community that operational and financial modalities for that concept would shortly be finalized, in particular between UNDP and DPI.

43. The importance of the United Nations information centres as vehicles for outreach to the populations of developed and developing countries was generally acknowledged, but they had an equally important role to play in the countries in transition. His Government therefore regretted the lack of progress in establishing an information component in Warsaw and hoped that such a centre would become operational in 1993 as a joint venture with UNDP. The centre's services could also be made available to neighbouring countries, particularly the Baltic States. The importance attached by the Polish Government to familiarizing its public with United Nations activities was exemplified by the special United Nations-related events already held in the country, and much more could be done in that area once an information centre was established. In addition, the countries in transition needed assistance in establishing or restructuring their own democratic information channels, and he hoped that their appeal for temporary assistance from the United Nations agencies or regional commissions concerned would not be turned down.

44. In Poland's view, three areas should be given priority in information activities, namely: international peace and security; sustainable social and economic development, in conjunction with environmental protection; and human rights, while other issues, such as apartheid, should be gradually phased out to release funds for new, important activities.

45. While information had effectively been disseminated on the second priority area, primarily through the World Economic Survey 1992 and the World Investment Report, production of the important system-wide publication on

(Mr. Woroniecki, Poland)

economic and social issues, Development Forum, remained behind schedule and its continued existence was threatened. Poland reiterated its support for that publication, which was of great benefit to the developing countries and the countries in transition and hoped that the matter would be taken up by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Fifth Committee.

46. His delegation was encouraged by progress in 1992 in coordinating information activities, and considered that the Joint United Nations Information Committee served a useful supplementary function. He suggested that more information on the Joint Committee's recommendations should be made available to Governments and to the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC), and hoped that the draft resolutions contained in the report of the Committee on Information would be adopted by consensus.

The meeting rose at noon.